Lexical Phrases and Language Teaching

By Melina Porto

This article explores the role of lexical phrases in language teaching. They are an important feature in language use and language acquisition, and they offer advantages for language teaching. Lexical phrases constitute an ideal unit for teaching so this article considers implications and presents some pedagogic guidelines.

Lexical Phrases in Language Use and Language Acquisition

Recent research in computer analysis of language has revealed a widespread occurrence of lexical patterns in adult language use. Pawley and Syder (1983:214) claim that "lexicalized sentence stems and other memorized strings form the main building blocks of fluent connected speech." Such stereotyping in language performance applies to language acquisition as well. Research into L1 (Peters 1983; Clark 1993) and L2 acquisition (Hakuta 1974; Peters 1983; Vihman 1982) has shown that routinized patterns are a recurrent feature in the process.

Lexical Phrases Defined

One of the first problems we are faced with is terminology. Researchers and linguists have coined their own idiosyncratic terms. Corder (1973:130–31) refers to "subroutines or ready-made sub-plans;" Hakuta (1974:289) distinguishes between "routines" and "pre-fabricated patterns;" and Peters (1983:6) uses the terms "formulaic frames" and "unit."

The term lexical phrases is adopted here to mean "multi-word lexical phenomena. . . which are conventionalized form/function composites that occur more frequently and have more idiomatically determined meaning than the language that is put together each time" (Nattinger and DeCarrico 1992:1).

Lexical Phrases and Language Teaching

The fact that lexical phrases are a recurrent feature of language use and language acquisition does not support the claim that they constitute an ideal unit for teaching. Let us now consider what makes them particularly advantageous for teaching purposes.

Fluency at Early Stages of Language Acquisition

Lexical phrases may be treated as wholes, either as complete or partially preassembled units. As such, they are stored in the lexicon as unanalyzed chunks just like words. Being ready-made,

they are easily retrieved. Consequently, they offer learners the possibility of expressing themselves in the absence of rich linguistic resources. Beginners—children, elementary students, and particularly adults, who have already developed their cognitive and semantic structures but lack the linguistic tools necessary to use the target language—become conversationally competent without the need to know the underlying structure of these phrases. Lexical phrases prove highly motivating by developing fluency at very early stages and thus promote a sense of achievement.

Growth in Language Development

Lexical phrases are not dead ends. They are analyzable by the rules of grammar. Therefore, they are dual in nature. Depending on the situation, they may be treated as unanalyzed units in the lexicon or produced afresh using the rules of syntax. This fact ensures a steady growth in language development. Lexical phrases allow for the expansion of previously acquired knowledge as learners become more proficient. The reason for this is that they have associated functional uses. Lexical phrases may be used to maintain a conversation, change the topic, make a request, greet people, and so on. For instance, a basic phrase to express sympathy would be I'm sorry. As learners become more proficient, the pattern may be expanded to obtain phrases like I'm (very/terribly/awfully) sorry about/to hear; that's (awful/terrible), what a (pity/shame)! This functional feature of lexical phrases offers learners the possibility of expressing the same function in increasingly more difficult ways by expanding an initial formula. Therefore, it constitutes a springboard for language development.1

The fact that lexical phrases may be analyzed by the rules of syntax should not lead teachers to assume that analysis is always convenient. Sometimes a phrase is most efficiently treated as a whole rather than broken down into its constituents. For instance, a phrase like If I were (you/the headmaster/the president, etc.) may be available for ready access since it is associated with certain situations and has a particular function (expressing advice). By contrast, an expression like If I were the person chosen to deliver the speech would be handled differently because the associated functional use is lost. It is generated by a process of creative construction by the rules of syntax. The fact that lexical phrases may be manipulated by learners in this way— resulting in patterns of increasing generalization—constitutes the basis for language expansion.

Overcoming Processing Constraints

Cook (1977) has suggested that the capacity of speech–processing memory is constrained by syntactic complexity both in adult and children native speakers. This limitation is especially acute in second language learners. This fact is further supported by research in computational analysis of language. Pawley and Syder (1983:191) refer to "native-like fluency" as the ability native speakers have to produce long strings of speech which exceed their capacity for encoding and decoding speech. Lexical phrases are a way of overcoming such constraints because they are stored as wholes and are therefore readily accessible. This means that learners do not need to pay attention to grammar if they use these phrases. By shifting their attention from grammar to

features such as relevance, coherence, and appropriateness, learners are able to organize their speech at discourse level and maintain the flow of conversation.

Easy Acquisition: Frequency and Context-dependence

Lexical phrases are easy to acquire for two reasons. First, they occur very frequently. Research (Yoshida 1978) has shown that recurrent phrases are acquired as memorized forms. High frequency provides natural recycling of such frames. Second, these formulas are context-bound and have situational meaning associated with them. Being recurrently associated with a certain context, learners are able to recall these phrases in similar situations (Huang and Hatch 1978). Frequency of occurrence and context association make lexical phrases highly memorable for learners and easy to pick up.

Efficient Device for Use

Because lexical phrases are context-bound and high in frequency, they can be easily acquired as wholes because of the recurrent association of form-context-function without the need to know their internal constituents. Stored as units, they are easily retrievable, highly accessible without the need for analysis by the rules of syntax. Therefore, they constitute an efficient device for use. This is particularly true of fixed phrases which are ready for access with minimal effort. Sperber and Wilson (1986:49) claim that "all human beings aim at the most efficient information processing possible." Fixed phrases have a small processing cost and their contribution is significant. They are a short-cut available to minimize effort.

Some Implications for Teaching Grammatical and Pragmatic Competence

Following Widdowson, competence can be defined as one's knowledge of language and ability to use it. Therefore, "competence has two components: knowledge and ability.... Knowledge can be characterized in terms of degrees of analyzability, ability can be characterized in terms of degrees of accessibility" (1989:132). In this framework, grammatical competence accounts for the learner's knowledge of lexical forms and their syntactic behavior. It encompasses knowledge of prefabricated language as well as knowledge of how to generate sentences by the rules of syntax. Pragmatic competence, on the contrary, is responsible for the learner's ability to access lexical phrases ready for use in appropriate contexts.

Lexical Phrases as a Harmonious Balance

The structural approach, with its strong emphasis on grammatical competence, did not give learners the tools to access all the analyzed knowledge they possessed. By contrast, the communicative approach provided learners with a repertoire of patterns to be accessed in appropriate contexts of use, but they remained grammatically incompetent. Lexical phrases offer a balance because they allow teachers to foster both accessibility and analyzability and thus contribute to the development of the learner's grammatical and pragmatic competence.

Problem of Selection

If indeed lexical phrases are an ideal unit for teaching, and given that our aim is to develop grammatical and pragmatic competence in learners, the question arises as to which phrases are the most effective for teaching.

One might logically want to teach those formulas most frequently used by native speakers as revealed by concordance data. I would suggest, however, that frequency does not equate with desirability for teaching. These two factors do not necessarily coincide. If they do, frequent phrases effective for teaching will enjoy the additional advantages mentioned so far. If they do not, we run the risk of encouraging learners to adopt phrases in a parrot-like fashion. Despite the fact that memorized forms may help make a learner conversationally competent because of their accessibility, much of their potential would be squandered.

Degrees of Variability and Flexibility

Lexical phrases belong to a continuum. At one end there are fixed phrases such as by the way, have a nice day, etc., which are not subject to alterations. Other phrases, however, allow some degree of modification. Such modification may be syntactic or lexical. Sometimes the degree of syntactic modification possible is highly variable. For example, not only, but also, and as well as are extremely flexible. Similarly, variation of lexical content within a syntactic structure is also a matter of degree. For instance, a phrase like a _____ ago accepts variations such as a day ago, a week ago, a month ago, a year ago, and so on. But in this case variations are constrained in the sense that only nouns or noun phrases may fill the slot. Other categories such as adjectives or adverbs are not possible.

It is evident that lexical phrases enjoy different degrees of variability and flexibility. To maximize the raw material these phrases offer for language development, teachers need to consider factors such as productivity, not only frequency of occurrence in concordance data, when selecting phrases. Focusing on fixed nonproductive phrases may have a hindering effect in the sense that there is no scope for expanding the frames as a way of enhancing learning. By contrast, more general, less fixed, more productive lexical phrases allow different degrees of analyzability and act as a catalyst to encourage the acquisition of new phrases.

Learner Awareness

Learners need awareness of two facts. First, not all easily accessible phrases are appropriate for all contexts. The naturalness or unmarkedness or neutrality of phrases like hello, hi, good (morning/afternoon/evening), depends on the situation. Hi, for example, would be appropriate among friends in a party but perhaps not in a conference. Second, there are limits to the extent a phrase is analyzable. Some syntactic modifications may be grammatically correct but odd. If the greeting How are you? was analyzed and How are you going to be? was produced, the function of the phrase as a greeting would be lost. Similarly, some lexical changes may be ungrammatical. We say a short time ago but not two short times ago. Making learners aware of these subtleties of the language is part of the task of developing their competence.

Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) suggest that syntactically simple phrases which allow a considerable amount of lexical variation may be the most powerful pattern generators. The frame modal + you + VP constitutes one example. The syntactic pattern is simple and it is paradigmatically flexible, that is, several modals and VP may be easily substituted. This ensures a steady growth in language development. Learners may generate increasingly more complex phrases as they become more proficient (e.g., Can you open the window? Could you lend me some money? Would you type this for me? with optional slots such as please, kindly).

Grammaticalized Lexis, not Lexicalized Grammar

Peters (1983) and Vihman (1982) have shown that both in L1 and in L2 acquisition, children start by selecting preassembled unanalyzed chunks to fit different situations. Only gradually do they expand those patterns by applying syntactic or grammatical rules as the link between lexis and context becomes insufficient to meet new communicative needs. The creative process of generating sentences by rules would have the supporting auxiliary role of adjusting already known formulas to new contexts.

If one acknowledges this shift of focus from grammar to lexis, two corollaries follow. First, some patterns which traditionally receive grammatical pedagogic treatment might indeed be best introduced as lexical phrases. This may apply to the first, second, and third conditionals; the passive; reported speech; the -ing form; the past participle; and will, would, and going to. Irregular past tense forms such as was, had, got, said, did, made, came, thought, and went may be first learned as lexical items. The concept of time may be most efficiently presented through lexis rather than tense. Second, some patterns relegated in language teaching, and usually reserved for advanced learners, might have a larger role than is often assumed. This is so in the case of idioms, metaphorical expressions, collocations, phrasal verbs, and institutionalized units like Not yet, certainly, I see your point but...,as far as I know, and for that matter.

Pedagogic Resolutions

How can teachers operationalize these ideas to relate them to the practicality of the classroom context? I contend that presenting learners with a set of prototypical examples of a chosen phrase in clear contexts is a good starting point. The phrase would be introduced as an unanalyzed whole. Learners would be encouraged to understand the pragmatic meaning of the whole phrase,

not its constituents, in relation to the context in which it occurs. If the unit is too long or unfamiliar for learners, drilling activities may give them practice in articulating the new pattern.2 Lexical exercises would follow. Lewis (1993:131) offers the following examples:

1. We say on television. How many other words can you think of which are similar to television, and go in the sentence It's on...?

2. How many expressions can you make which use:

a. part of the verb have with:
b. part of the verb give with:

1. a party	6. a cup of tea
2. lunch 7	7. time to
3. a pound 8	8. a hand
4. a present for 9	9. a cold
5. a present to 10	10. the chance to

How does grammar fit into this picture? Following Lewis, grammatical explanations have a minor role. Instead, learners explore grammar by themselves and construct their own personal, provisional rules. "Grammar is primarily receptive" (1993:149) and should aim at learner awareness. Learners would be given the opportunity to observe language by themselves and critically reflect on what they perceive.3 This proposal highlights the use of identifying, sorting, matching, and comparing activities whose goal is consciousness raising. Questions like Can you find...? and Did you notice...? are crucial. The following are some examples:

1. Listen to the tape. Write A each time you hear can /'kn/ and B every time you hear can't ka:nt/ (identifying).

2. Sort the following into two groups: adjective + at; adjective + to (sorting).

3. Match the verb play with the phrases it is usually associated with (a party, the piano, breakfast, tennis, a car, a record, etc.) (matching).

4. Read the following extracts. What differences can you find? Why are they different? (comparing)

Conclusion

Grammar and syntax have been favoured for years. However, the primary role of lexical phrases in both L1 and L2 acquisition and use has been strongly supported by research. Careful scrutiny of the nature of these phrases reveals that they enjoy advantageous features which warrant their

restoration as an ideal unit for teaching. It is now our responsibility as teachers to make the most out of them.

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